

“OCULAR PROOF” OF MORBID JEALOUSY IN ORSON
WELLES'S NOIR *OTHELLO* (1952)

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ABSTRACT: This article considers Orson Welles's *Othello* (1952) as a performance text in its own right, and discusses the film's use of cinematographic techniques in constructing a visual language which complements the verbal language of Shakespeare's playtext. The 1965 National Theatre filmed production of *Othello* (dir. Stuart Burge) is also discussed in order to further highlight the cinematic qualities of the Welles production. Particular attention is paid to Welles's use of cinematographic techniques and black and white photography to foreground themes of enclosure, entrapment, and opposition in his visual interpretation of the playtext. The film is considered as an example of visual *rewriting*, using Alan Dessen's term which applies to situations where a director moves closer to the role of a playwright.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare on film. *Othello*. Performance.

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“PROVA OCULAR” DA INVEJA MÓRBIDA EM *OTELO* DE
ORSON WELLES (1952)

RESUMO: O presente artigo considera o filme *Otelo* de Orson Welles (1952) como um *performance text* de mérito próprio, e examina o uso de técnicas cinematográficas na construção de uma linguagem visual que complementa a linguagem verbal do texto de Shakespeare. Também é discutido o filme da encenação teatral do National Theatre, dirigido por Stuart Burge (1965), a fim de destacar as qualidades cinemáticas do filme de Welles. É dada atenção ao uso por Welles de técnicas cinematográficas e de fotografia em preto e branco a fim de destacar temas de clausura, apresamento e antagonismo na sua interpretação visual do texto da peça. O filme é considerado como um exemplo visual de *rewriting*, utilizando o termo de Alan Dessen, que se aplica a situações em que um diretor se aproxima ao papel de dramaturgo.

Palavras-chave: Shakespeare no cinema. *Otelo*. Performance.

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The American film-maker and actor Orson Welles (1915-1985) was aged just 26 when he directed, produced, and starred in *Citizen Kane* (1941), a landmark cinematic achievement that is now frequently cited as one of the greatest films ever made. The abiding acclaim for *Citizen Kane* is owed in part to its narrative scope, and to the remarkable range exhibited by Welles in portraying the life of the titular character, Charles Foster Kane, from the age of 25 until his death at around the age of 80. It is a picture that is also famed for its technical innovation, most notably the extensive use of deep focus cinematography and low-angle shots.¹ Welles was a fearless and ambitious young director, beginning a storied career during the Golden Age of Hollywood in the 1940s. A decade after *Citizen Kane*, and after a protracted production process, he brought Shakespeare's *Othello* to the screen, for which he was awarded the *Palme d'Or* at the Cannes Film Festival in 1952. This article considers Welles's *Othello* as a performance text in its own right, and discusses the use of cinematographic technique in constructing a visual language which complements the verbal language of Shakespeare's playtext. The 1965 filmed theatre version of *Othello*, directed by Stuart Burge and starring Laurence Olivier (1907-1989), is also discussed in order to further highlight the cinematic qualities of the Welles production. Particular attention is paid to Welles's use of cinematographic techniques and the exploitation of black and white photography, typical of contemporary *film noir*, in order to foreground themes of enclosure, entrapment, and opposition in his visual interpretation of the playtext.

A performance at the court of King James I on 1 November 1604 is commonly cited as the *terminus ante quem* for the earliest performance of William Shakespeare's *Othello*, which was first

1 The term *cinematic* describes all that relates to the cinema, including the soundscape, while *cinematographic* more specifically pertains to the art and techniques of motion-picture photography.

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published in quarto form in 1622. The play represents the dramatist's next attempt at the tragic form after *Hamlet*, and it is marked by a significant shift in dramaturgy, as Frank Kermode has noted: "In the rapid progress of its plot, and the violence of its thematic oppositions, *Othello* stands in extraordinary contrast with *Hamlet*, its hesitant, deliberately delaying predecessor" (KERMODE, 1974, p. 1199). Third in the chronology of Shakespeare's so-called mature tragedies, which begin with *Julius Caesar* in 1599, *Othello* is not always mentioned in the same breath as *Hamlet* and *King Lear* when discussion turns to the question of which is the "greatest tragedy." Of course, little can come of such an arbitrary evaluation of "greatness" across a series of works that together indicate the sheer scope of Shakespeare's dramatic vision and his willingness continuously to develop the art form. Besides, while *Othello* may be said to lack the philosophical profundity and political import of those historically more eulogised works, the psychological degeneration of its eponymous character lends it a peculiar force that challenges all who are involved in performing the play on stage or screen. Especially for those working with the cinematic medium, the focus of dramatic action on Othello's state of mind poses a problem as "[t]here is little exterior action in the central scenes of the play to fill the screen with spectacle" (DAVIES, 2011, p. 11).

Every reading or performance of the extant printed text can constitute a new construction of meaning. Shakespeare's many textual ambiguities are best explored through performance, with the extant text(s) representing only a part of a manifold process of meaning and interpretation. Moreover, transposition from the dramatic to the cinematic medium further distinguishes the resultant work – the film – as a text in its own right. In filmed Shakespeare, the medium affords additional layers of meaning that may be constructed through visual language, and which merit interpretation as distinct

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from the printed text. The notion of a *performance text*, proposed by Marco De Marinis in *The Semiotics of Performance* (1993), highlights the role of factors beyond the written word in the interpretation of the various units of discourse that can be considered as *texts*. Theatrical performances are examples of such units of discourse, allowing De Marinis to conclude that “the units of theatrical production known as performances can be considered as texts, and can thus become the object of textual analysis” (DE MARINIS, 1993, p. 47). Likewise, cinematic interpretations of Shakespeare's plays may be considered as performance texts, whose analysis is unburdened by any essentialist search for inherent meaning in Shakespeare's writing. The semiotics of performance as delineated by De Marinis includes the verbal language spoken by the actors, but also the visual elements of a production that must complement the spoken word in order to successfully realise any given conception of Shakespeare. The principal focus of the present article is the non-verbal language of Welles's 1952 film, a derivative performance text of Shakespeare's *Othello*.

Considering the reputation of the play among Shakespeare's *oeuvre*, there have been relatively few major filmed versions of *Othello* to date.² Welles's 1952 film was followed three years later by that of the Soviet director Sergei Yutkevich (1955). The 1965 Burge/Olivier *Othello* was a filmed version of a National Theatre stage production, and Jonathan Miller brought the play to the small screen as part of the BBC Television Shakespeare series in 1981. Most recently, Oliver Parker's 1995 film starred Laurence Fishburne as Othello, and Kenneth Branagh as Iago. The character of Othello has long been counted among the most demanding of all Shakespearean roles, not

2 A. C. Bradley included *Othello* – alongside *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* – as part of his discussion of the Shakespearean “great tragedies” in his classic *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904).

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least because of the elusive boundary between statesmanlike dignity and psychological disintegration that must be quickly and convincingly traversed by the actor. Olivier's landmark performance, filmed by Burge in 1965 to immortalise John Dexter's successful stage production of the previous year, is widely acknowledged as a twentieth-century rival to the primacy of Edmund Kean (1787-1833), who first played the part in 1814 (PARSONS; MASON, 2000, p. 162). In terms of the cinematic medium, *Othello* presents significant challenges to actors and directors who work within the limitations of an exclusive camera focus, and without the benefit of an open stage and a collaborative audience that may observe several planes of action simultaneously, as was the case at the Globe playhouse in London when the play was first enacted at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The “reciprocity of tension” between the audience and the characters on stage is lost in a filmed version of a stage production, such as that which features Olivier's memorable performance (DAVIES, 1994, p. 197). Burge's rendering came as part of a wave of Shakespearean filmed theatre that swept England during the 1960s, with the aim to “capture on film as far as possible the essence of theatrical performance” (DAVIES, 1994, p. 196). In such an endeavour, dramatic conventions and the aesthetics of theatre are privileged above cinematic innovation, and while the effect of a powerful theatrical moment – such as Othello striking Desdemona in act 4 scene 1 – may be diminished on screen, it is true that “when the placing and concentration of the camera work is in line with the theatrical intentions of the original production, the film is both compelling and satisfying” (DAVIES, 1994, p. 198). The 1965 film remains a notable production in the performance history of *Othello*, principally for the “remarkable physical detail” of Olivier's performance (PARSONS; MASON, 2000, p. 164), yet it can hardly be considered a *bona fide* transposition of the play to the cinematic

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medium.

Of all the screen versions of *Othello*, Welles provided arguably the most startlingly cinematic treatise of the play. His film exploits the resources of the cinematic medium like few others, foregrounding the directorial skills he had already showcased in *Citizen Kane*. In contrast to Olivier's powerful and dominant performance over a decade later, Welles's "restrained acting style" in the role of Othello ensures that the "cinematic language" of the film is what produces meaning above all else (DAVIES, 2011, p. 13). The opening interpolation of the funeral ceremony signals this intent from the outset, with the bodies of Othello and Desdemona in solemn procession sharply contrasted with the figure of Iago, who is frantically dragged in the opposite direction before being hoisted vertically into the air inside a cage. Crucially, the scene is not found in Shakespeare's playtext, and is construed through visual language alone. The thematic implications here established are those of opposition and separation. The director's characteristic fast editing, another hallmark of *Citizen Kane*, helps to consolidate the separation of black from white throughout the film, and reinforces the racial difference of the Moor protagonist to a greater extent than the actor's blackface, the effect of which is in any case tempered in a monochrome production. Othello's self-doubt and psychological vulnerability are illustrated less by the actor's performance than by the effects of camera movements, perspectives, and particularly the use of shadows and patterns. Anthony Davies asserts that Welles's Othello "looks like an Anglo-Saxon male" despite the use of make-up, and indeed that "[t]here is no creation of an engaging or distinctive character in Welles's Othello" (DAVIES, 2011, p. 13). Rather, it is the framing of the character with outstanding cinematographic technique which allows the film successfully to isolate his descent into jealous madness.

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The thumbprints of Welles's distinctive directorial style are in evidence throughout his rendering of *Othello*. He truncates and adjoins act 2 scene 1 and act 2 scene 3, and has Iago's conversation with Roderigo play out directly before Cassio's entrance and the humorous exchange on drinking. Iago talks with Roderigo at the base of a castle rampart, giving a brief but telling glance towards a soldier in lieutenant's insignia who is visible, in focus, in the distance. The lieutenant is Cassio, and he duly approaches for his parley with Iago. This remarkable visual interpolation recalls a famous shot from *Citizen Kane*, where the young Charles Foster Kane is seen in the background of a deep focus shot, playing in the snow, as his parents agree to have him taken out of their care. Similarly here, Cassio is present and in focus in the shot, but unaware of Iago's plans for him. The audience can thus see the object of Iago's machinations at the very instant of their development.

By the time Welles completed his *Othello*, he was a director steeped in the *film noir* genre. Film critic Roger Ebert writes of the consequences of the film's troubled production history: "Part of [Welles's] approach was born of necessity: He could not afford to record sound on many of his locations, and so he placed the camera to make the actor's lips invisible, shooting over shoulders or at oblique angles. He planned to dub the dialogue in later" (EBERT, 1992). Whether out of preference or circumstance, Welles found an outlet in the cinematographic conventions of *film noir*, with which he was well acquainted. The genre was given its name by contemporary French film critics, and it now applies to a range of black and white mysteries and crime dramas produced in the 1940s and 1950s. In 1949, during the often interrupted production period for *Othello*, Welles starred in *The Third Man*, the classic British *film noir*. At a basic level, the thematic concerns of *film noir* can be seen to suit the plot of Shakespeare's *Othello*: "Such films dealt with hard-boiled detectives,

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gangsters, or ordinary people tempted into crime. Often a seductive femme fatale lured the protagonist into a dangerous scheme for hidden purposes of her own, “as in classic Hollywood *films noir* such as *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Double Indemnity* (1944)” (BORDWELL; THOMPSON, 2008, p. 423). Crucially, however, the visual style of *film noir* proved the ideal conduit for Welles to portray Othello's psychological disintegration, his self-doubt, and his entrapment by Iago. Disorienting oblique camera angles, as mentioned by Ebert, are a common feature of the genre, while stark contrasts in lowly-lit scenes combine with the recurrent use of divisive shadows. Patterns are thereby cast over the central characters to symbolise guilt, accusation, or claustrophobia. A staple image of American *film noir*, for example, is the shadow cast on a protagonist by window blinds, resulting in the partial obscuration and apparent disintegration of the character.

One aspect of Welles's cinematographic technique which allows him to externalise and concretise some of the intangible processes at the heart of the play is his employment of a recurring motif of separation and containment. Strikingly foregrounded in the image of a caged Iago shown on public display in the opening interpolation, it is a theme repeated in various guises throughout. Prison-like bars and shadows suggest entrapment, while white Venetian columns and imposing, monolithic architecture on Cyprus are offset against the dark, cavernous spaces of deception and intrigue where Iago's machinations find an outlet. Not only is Othello seen again and again to be “imprisoned” behind a grid pattern or shadow, but the motif is reiterated in the rigging of ships or the floor of the baths where Cassio is attacked, among several other instances. Even the detail of Desdemona's latticed hair accessory is suggestive of Iago's “net that shall enmesh them all” (2.3.361-62).³ Although Iago is shown to be

3 All citations from the play are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare* (1st

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imprisoned in a cage at the very beginning and end of the film, a proleptic image of ultimate justice, it is Othello that is caught in shadow and placed behind bars repeatedly throughout the intervening action of the film, while Iago roams free in space. In direct contrast to Olivier, Welles portrays an outwardly calm, yet internally disturbed figure, a man whose “self doubts are the effect of the director's technique and the camera's point of view, not the passions of the man” (STONE, 2002, p. 189).

In contrast with Welles's on-screen appearance, Olivier is heavily blacked up in Burge's colour production and plays a “strikingly black African or West Indian” in what now represents the last major portrayal of the role of Othello on stage or screen by a white actor. His appearance and mannerisms exploit the contemporary social context of West Indian immigration to the UK in the 1950s and 1960s, and the performance has inevitably and justifiably become a site for criticism, and a target for charges of racism in subsequent decades. Olivier is dominant in this film to the extent that it suffers in terms of failing to show a context for much of the action. Other characters are dwarfed by Olivier in the title role, and there is little attention given to some moments that are important to the plot, such as the senate scene (1.3). Insofar as Burge's film constitutes a response to public calls for a permanent record of a singular theatrical performance, its priorities are somewhat different from those of Welles's heavily cinematographic study of the play. Indeed, it has been argued that in a monochrome production where Othello's blackness is not nearly as accentuated as by Olivier, “Welles does much to strip Shakespeare's play of its racial thematics, or at least to reduce racial difference to the fundamentally cinematic grid of black and white photography” (STONE, 2002, p. 189).

The so-called temptation scene (3.3), which sees Iago verbally

ed.), ed. G. Blakemore-Evans et al. (1974).

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penetrating Othello's psychological defences, and the later scene that places Cassio barely within earshot of Othello as he talks with Iago (4.1), are examples of the productive use of cinematic techniques to convey meaning in Welles's *Othello*, particularly when compared to the filmed theatre production directed by Burge. The latter foregrounds oratory skill in the delivery of Shakespeare's language, and Olivier's remarkable voice modulation and physical contortions dramatically convey the sudden onset of jealousy that is triggered by Iago. In fact, it may be argued that Olivier's immediate and histrionic reaction to Iago's prompts in the temptation scene, at times recalling Victorian ranting fashions, represents a reduction of Iago's subtle and persistent intimations as suggested by Shakespeare's text. Welles's approach more effectively demonstrates how the antagonist's words gradually begin to have their intended effect when combined with the workings of Othello's own mind. Welles has Othello and Iago walking alongside each other atop the castle battlements, exposed to the elements. Both faces occupy the camera frame, although Othello's is foregrounded. As the pair progress, several gun ports are shown in the background, intermittently with guns but often empty. The setting in general represents Othello's psychological defences against outside forces, with the substantial and imposing walls protecting the castle within from foreign aggressors and the natural power of the sea. The occasional sight of a large cannon as part of those defences may be seen to reflect Othello's interjections in the dialogue, at first questioning and resisting Iago's line of enquiry.

As the provocation begins to take hold, Othello leads the pair into an armoury; a dark and quiet confined area that has a claustrophobic effect after the wide open space of the castle walls that had been accompanied by the sound of seagulls and crashing waves. The temptation scene then culminates with Iago symbolically taking off Othello's armour, as if to complete the dismantling of his defences

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at the hands of an ostensibly friendly conspirator.⁴ Othello then catches sight of himself in two slightly convex mirrors that distort his appearance and show “nature erring from itself” (3.3.227). It is perhaps at this point that Welles's cinematography most obviously captures the psychological implications of Shakespeare's words, as Othello's reflection in the mirror, with bright, bulbous eyes, accompanies Iago's talk of “foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural” (3.3.233). Later, when Othello demands “the ocular proof” from Iago (3.3.360), he physically threatens him by forcing him to the edge of the cliff, and Iago is shown peering down at the raging sea below. This corroborates the impression of the castle walls in general as symbolising the division between the worlds of the two characters. Through rhetoric, Iago escapes danger at this point and retains access to the castle, and thereby to Othello's mind. In act 4 scene 1, as Iago bids his master to eavesdrop on his conversation with Cassio, Welles's Othello assumes the position of a voyeur, with further clear emphasis on his eyes. The visual is foregrounded here, as in the film as a whole: “[t]he reduction to eyes is important in indicating the centrality of the ocular for constituting Othello as the subject of jealous desire” in Welles's rendering (STONE, 2002, p. 190). Welles's own eyes, in character as Othello, are also his camera's eye in his role as director. The narrow and constricted focus of the camera when showing Othello's point of view is indicative of the film's markedly cinematic treatment of his state of mind. This again is in contrast with Olivier's performance, where the emphasis is placed primarily on what Othello hears, rather than what he sees, and he reacts in a more outward and active manner.

Throughout his *Othello*, Welles clearly demarcates spatial and thematic oppositions through the use of *chiaroscuro* effects, dizzying

4 The motifs of the armoury and Iago helping Othello to disarm are adopted by Oliver Parker in his 1995 filmed *Othello*.

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perspectives, and deep focus shots.⁵ His restrained portrayal of the character, particularly when compared to Olivier's bombastic performance, allows the cinematic techniques he employs to assume added significance in revealing the power of Shakespeare's language, a deeply psychological power in the case of this play. Welles's fast editing and uncompromising direction of this film reflects Shakespeare's dramaturgy in fashioning a successor to *Hamlet*. Unlike that great tragedy of ambiguity and deliberation, in *Othello* Shakespeare “wanted white to be suddenly blackened, not to pass through indeterminate greys of growing suspicion and meanness” (KERMODE, 1974, p. 1199). Welles's opening interpolation of the funeral procession, with its stark contrasts and powerful foreshadowing of tragedy, allows him to set the tone for such a production from the very start, and this may be considered a type of visual *rewriting* (sic), to employ Alan Dessen's term which defines “situations where a director or adapter moves closer to the role of the playwright” (DESSEN, 2002, p. 3). While Olivier's performance in Burge's 1965 film remains exemplary of the power of one actor's performance in bringing Shakespeare to life, Welles overlays his own portrayal of the lead role with an array of cinematographic techniques that ultimately allow him to foreground the craft of the director and the importance of the visual in filmed Shakespeare.

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⁵ The term *chiaroscuro* describes the use of contrasted light and shadow in art.

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